

July 10, 2011

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The permanence of the soul, its continued life after death, was not in contention among the early Christians. Indeed, thanks in part to Plato, some form of belief in a spiritual afterlife was quite in fashion in the Greco-Roman culture where the Apostles proclaimed the Gospel.

The Apostle Paul, for his part, certainly anticipated an afterlife immediately following death. This persuasion prompted him to "desire to depart and be with Christ" (Philippians 1:23). This immediate afterlife was not, however, the true goal of Paul's striving, which was, rather, to "attain to the resurrection from the dead" (3:11). Anyway, no early Christians---as far as we can tell---contested the expectation of an immediate afterlife.

When the Apostles proclaimed Jesus as risen, however, they did not mean that he had somehow survived in a spiritual state after his death on the Cross. They meant, quite plainly, "he *rose* again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:4). It was an event, not a static condition.

Also, it was emphatically physical, not in the sense of induced by physical forces, but in the sense that it happened *to the body*. Had this not been the case, the Resurrection of Jesus would not have happened "according to the Scriptures." The Resurrection-hope held out by Holy Scripture had to do *with the body*. When Isaiah prophesied, "Your dead shall live," he went on to specify, "their corpses will arise" (Isaiah 26:19).

It was this physical quality of the Christian hope that proved to be too challenging for some of the brethren at Corinth. They summarized their argument with the sarcastic query. "How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?" (1 Corinthians 15:35)

What those individuals contested was not a belief in an afterlife, but the physical cosmology implicitly contained in the thesis, "the God of our fathers raised up Jesus" (Acts 5:30). They were unable to grasp that the Gospel proclaimed this truth as a vindication of the whole created order.

Holy Scripture, after all, had not declared, "God approved of all the spiritual things He had made," but, "God saw everything (*ko*) that He had formed, and indeed it was very good." (Genesis 1:31).

It was in refuting the skeptics at Corinth that the Apostle Paul came to understand the Resurrection of Christ as God's historical act for the purpose of rectifying the evils inflicted on the created order by Adam's Fall. The Resurrection had to be physical, because death and corruption were physical.

Although it was a single event in history, the "logic" of the Resurrection implied that the whole material world, starting with the bodies of Christians, was destined for restoration and transformation through the risen and glorified flesh of Christ. This meant that the true and ultimate afterlife anticipated by Christians was not based on the immortality of the soul, but on the resurrection of the body.

In answering the Corinthian skepticism, Paul established the "logic" of the Resurrection in a chain of short hypothetical syllogisms. Within 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, the word "if" appears nine times, leading to the final inference, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable."

At this point, Paul is ready to move from apologetics to theology, and he marks the transition with a formal "now": "But *now* Christ is risen from the dead and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (15:20).

To speak theologically means to address truth through the categories, the images, the questions, and the declarations of Holy Scripture. The Resurrection of Christ was not just a bare fact. It was a theological revelation. It happened "according to the Scriptures." Because this was so, Paul consulted Holy Scripture, in order to grasp what the Resurrection meant.

It is most significant that the first Scripture he consulted on this matter was Genesis. Whereas St. Peter consulted the Book of Psalms for this purpose (Acts 2:24-36), Paul went back to one of the earliest episodes of biblical history, the account of the Fall: "For since death came through a man, through a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:21-22).

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